

KERR-CHANGEPPOINT

WILLIAM K. KERR PEN CO. OKLAHOMA'S ONLY COMMERCIAL PENMAKER

HISTORY. Founded in 1932 by William Kelly Kerr to produce fountain pens, Kerr Changepoint was and is the only commercial penmaker in Oklahoma.

Mr. Kerr was an accountant with Sinclair Oil Company. After being laid off in 1931, he began making fountain pens in his garage in the evenings and selling them during the day. The William K. Kerr Pen Company was successful despite its beginning as an Oklahoma-based business during the Depression. After the death of W.K. Kerr, Sr. in 1954, the company was headed by William K. Kerr, Jr., and upon his recent death in 1992, the company continues. Kerr Changepoint still makes writing instruments as well as banking supplies and injection molded plastics.

Its first factory was located on East 15th Street in Tulsa, and after a series of moves, the current facility is now headquartered in an industrial park in southeastern part of the city. The exact level of pen production is not known, but thousands of pens were produced monthly during the 1940s and 1950s, and 150 to 200 people have been employed by Kerr over the past three and one-half decades.

Although Kerr pens were distributed nationwide through stationery and office supply stores, few early Kerr pens are in collections. No doubt this is due in part to Kerr's marketing that emphasized institutional customers, especially banks. Also, Kerr did not

advertise widely, thus further reducing its visibility.

FOUNTAIN PENS. Kerr fabricated pocket pens, desk sets, and counter sets (a desk set with the pen chained to the base). Kerr produced all pen components itself with the exception of nibs and screw-in filling units. Desk and counter sets were first produced in 1932 and continue to be made today; pocket pens were made in the 1930s and 1940s.

The earliest Kerr fountain pens were eyedropper filled with interchangeable stainless steel nibs. The customer removed the nib/feed assembly to fill the pen. The earliest single pen desk set cost \$2.50; adding a chain cost an additional quarter. Later fountain pens used a bulb-filling mechanism, a simple design that permits a large ink capacity. Six steel nib sizes were available originally; the majority cost a nickel, and the most expensive was a dime. Gold-plated steel, alloy-tipped steel, and iridium-tipped steel nibs were added with iridium-tipped nibs costing the most, a quarter. The pocket pen had a simple clip attached to the cap by a ring and cost \$2.75.

Most pens were opaque black, but pens with transparent barrels were available in four colors-red, blue, green, and black. Both black and red barrel tapers were available on desk/counter pens. Pens sold with the *Presidential* desk set line often came with an unusually broad metal ferrule connecting the barrel body and the tapered end.

It is obvious that Kerr followed a simple and enduring design philosophy as expressed in an early advertising circular:

Their construction is simple and practical. Anyone can take them apart and put them together again. All parts are replaceable by the user, thus the pen never needs to be sent in for repairs.

Unlike many inexpensive pens that relied on eye-catching colored plastics to hide inferior parts, Kerr pens are simple, durable, and easily repaired. The pen owner could change the nib and screw-in filling unit without having to send the pen to a repair facility. The plastics used were as thick and well constructed as they were plain. These characteristics would have pleased value-conscious corporate and individual customers, and the list of banks using Kerr pens is impressive. Kerr's major competitor was Esterbrook which also sold institutional desk sets and high quality, inexpensive steel nib pocket pens.

BALLPOINTS. Kerr began offering ballpoints along with fountain pens in the 1950s. In fact, the same pen barrel would accept either a ballpoint or a fountain pen and could be changed by the customer. By the early 1960s, fountain pens ceased to be offered, and all Kerr pens today are ballpoints. For a time both brown and black ballpoint pens were available. Early ballpoints had a large diameter ink reservoir which did not work satisfactorily, as was the case with many early ballpoints. Later, smaller ballpoint refills that relied on capillary action were substituted for the earlier design. Today's ballpoints have a long tapered end, whereas some earlier ones had a blunt taper.

DESK AND COUNTER SETS. Kerr's first pens were for desk and counter sets. Fountain pens used with desk sets were mechanically the same

as the pocket pens. Many materials were used for both single, double, and even triple pen bases; walnut, ceramic, aluminum, bronze, and brass with a variety of coatings are known. The metal bases are very heavy and durable. Round stepped metal bases appear to be the most popular early pen bases, but pyramidal, triangular, ribbed slab, and plain slab bases are also found. Most Kerr pen holders are thick-walled black plastic and have a distinctive shape; later *Presidential* pen holders were metal. The current catalog offers slab and pyramidal bases; a swirled round base was discontinued within the past year. Current desk sets in the *Presidential* and *Classic Line* cost \$18.15-36.00, and the basic ballpoint is \$4.00.

Since Kerr targeted banks and other institutions, counter pens have been an important, if not dominant, part of its production. In fact, it is believed that William Kerr, Sr. invented the use of a chain to secure the pen to the pen base. Chains came in bronze/gold or nickel to match the pen.

A FINAL THOUGHT. For a variety of reasons, the Kerr Changepoint story remains unknown to pen collectors. Yet, this firm has produced pens continually for 64 years. Conklin, Waterman (American), Wahl-Eversharp, and many other better-known pen companies are gone, but Kerr still makes well made pens. Perhaps "simple and practical" have their advantages.

Prepared for a Kerr Changepoint pen display at the 4th annual Copelin's Vintage Pen Fair, Norman, OK. Most pens displayed here are from the private collection of Richard Barbee with a few from Paul Minnis' collection. Text by Paul Minnis, 3 April 1996. I would like to thank Mrs. Lemons and the staff at Kerr Changepoint for providing historical information.